

Matthew 2:1-12

Is the good news of Jesus Christ for people like us? The right answer to that question is 'yes'. Of course it is! But also, the right answer is 'yes, but...'. If the good news is only for people we feel comfortable with or familiar with, generally, then it's a very particular 'good news', isn't it? The lessons of Epiphany challenge narrow assumptions about the reach of the light of Christ. After all, the star that drew the Magi to Christ, was visible to *all* who had the inclination to look up and see it. It was not a private viewing for the privileged but a guide to the seeker after truth. What did Jesus say later in his ministry? 'Ask, and it shall be given you;

search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you” (Matthew 7:7).

The season of Epiphany, for its significance is experienced through a series of epiphanies from the visit of the Magi through the baptism of Jesus culminating in the Transfiguration, is in many areas of the world a bigger holiday than Christmas. Its rituals of gift giving are tied to treasure-bearing wise men instead of a jolly fat man in a red suit. In some regions, children leave shoes filled with hay outside their homes. The hay is for the camels of the wise men, who leave gifts for the children in the shoes as thanks before resuming their journey to Bethlehem.

Followers of the Ethiopian Orthodox faith celebrate Epiphany by commemorating Jesus' baptism in the Jordan River.

To mark the day, tents called Tabots are pitched to house tablets bearing the Ten Commandments. Hundreds of thousands gather at Jan Meda, the largest open field in the capital Addis Ababa, where 11 Tabots were erected for the celebration of Epiphany.

Holy water is sprinkled on believers, and spiritual songs sung by clergy wearing colourful vestments enliven the occasion.

Attending the ceremony for the first time, Richard Hillico from Australia described the celebration as "massive".

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” he said, adding that the sense of get-together in Ethiopia differs from festivals in Australia, which he said, only bring families together, not such a huge crowd.

“I came here to see what my friends said was a very colourful event. I found it even better than what they described. The religious procession, the chants, the way people dress all give the occasion a great sense of togetherness and a joyous mood.”

Is the good news of Jesus Christ for people like us? Yes, but..... it’s good for us to receive a broader perspective because that’s what is at the heart of the challenge of Epiphany.

What do seekers after truth look like? The early generations of the Christian church speculated about the nature of the Magi. Soon, the unnumbered Magi, became three largely because there were three gifts presented. Then the Venerable Bede in the eighth century named them as Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar. Melchior an old man with white hair and a long beard, Gaspar as young and beardless with a ruddy complexion and Balthasar as black skinned and heavily bearded. All of this has been discredited as historically invalid but like all established myth resonates with the heart of the message. The magi are an anticipation of the Gentile Christians of the early Church

community. And so they considered that the good news of Jesus Christ was for people like them. That's one side of the great identity issue that is raised by Epiphany.

The other side of the issue concerns an appropriate response to the light of the revelation of Christ and that is highlighted very much through the very different responses of the Magi and King Herod to that light. The Magi came to Jerusalem looking for the King of the Jews. But they did not go Herod! Herod was the self-proclaimed King of the Jews and yet the Magi knew that he was not the one they were looking for and as with all fraudsters the instinctive reaction to being found out was fear.

Two explorers were on a jungle safari when suddenly a ferocious lion jumped in front of them. "Keep calm" the first explorer whispered. "Remember what we read in that book on wild animals? If you stand perfectly still and look the lion in the eye, he will turn and run." "Sure," replied his companion. "You've read the book, and I've read the book. But has the lion read the book?"

Fear is such a powerful emotion that it is sure to produce an outcome that will affect a situation. Herod was driven by fear to take drastic action and that would lead to the terrible slaughter of the infant boys. Herod claimed a birthright that was not his: he was not the king of the Jews.

The Magi were not interested in a false birthright but only in following the light of Christ and its implication for their lives and destiny. Their single-minded dedication to following the truth stands as a powerful witness to all the peoples of the world. We should be following their example. We may not be comfortable with their astrological charts; their unscientific speculations; their strange appearance and manner; their bold pushiness to find answers. But that's the way they were and all are part of the human quest to find the truth that sheds light on the way. As the journey of Epiphany continues in the weeks to come we will be led to the Jordan, to a wedding in Cana, to a

synagogue in Nazareth, to a cliff above a town, to a boat on the sea of Galilee, to a vast meeting open air meeting and then finally to a mountaintop. On each occasion we will be privileged to witness a unique manifestation of Christ. We will be led to reflect on our own personal epiphanies; those times when we have seen him as we have never seen him before, and we are led like the Magi to keep journeying on the way.